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Kunstenaars van de Kultuurkamer: Geschiedenis en herinnering

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Summary

This research describes the reception of Dutch visual artists who, as a consequence of their collaborationist behaviour during the Second World War, became known as being ‘wrong’ (*fout*). The book is divided in two parts. The first part, *History*, includes the first two chapters. These chapters are dedicated to ‘wrong’ art and its artists during the German occupation of the Netherlands. The second part, *Memory*, consists of chapter three, chapter four, and concluding remarks. This part focuses on the repercussions of the war in the post-war art world. This structure shows how human memory often distorts, displaces and inflates historical events and how this is related to a community’s collective memory and identity.

The first chapter describes the Netherlands’ art world in wartime. The national socialist regime spent a relatively large amount of money on art, as art was meant to convince the people of the virtues of the national socialist ideology. Very strict standards were set for art: it had to be realistic and represent popular (*volkse*) themes such as landscapes of Holland, farm life, ideal cityscapes, and ‘Aryan’ persons. Registration with the Dutch Chamber of Culture (*Kultuurkamer*) was mandatory. This was a national socialist association that provided subsidies and material, organised exhibitions, and took action against *kitsch*. Artists who did not register were banned from pursuing their profession. Jewish artists were not permitted to join. The second chapter is dedicated to the war histories of *Arti et Amicitiae*, Amsterdam’s artists society, as well as painters Henri van de Velde and Pyke Koch, and the sculptor Johan Polet. *Arti et Amicitiae*’s board collaborated with the Nazi regime largely out of economic interest, while Van de Velde was a member of the Dutch National Socialist Movement (*Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* or NSB), and Koch sympathised with Italy’s fascism. Polet had sympathised with leftist political movements in the 1920s, but later became sympathetic to fascism and national socialism. During the war, he was a member of the Culture Council (*Kultuurraad*), a prestigious national socialist institution with an advisory function within the cultural sector. Chapter three describes the purification of the art world after the liberation from the perspective of five influential institutions: the official purification council for the visual arts (*Ereraad voor de Beeldende Kunsten*), the Dutch Federation of Professional Artists’ Societies (*Nederlandse Federatie van Beroepsverenigingen van Kunstenaars*), founded by artists who had been member of the resistance during the war, Amsterdam’s mu-

nicipal museum the Stedelijk Museum, the arts department of the Dutch government, and finally the arts department of the Amsterdam city council. The fourth chapter describes how artists society *Arti et Amicitiae* and the three individual artists that were introduced in chapter two, functioned in the post-war art world and how their work was appreciated.

This combination of micro- and macro-history results in an account of artists who were *personae non gratae* after the war and of their oeuvres. It also is an account of the society of which they were part and how the Dutch have dealt with the war's legacies in the years since. The research considers artworks as aesthetic objects, but also looks at the function of art in the formation of a community's common identity. It gives an alternative view on the art historical canon, that prescribes what is 'good' art and what is not. This broad approach has yielded widely ranging art and culture-historical findings. In what follows, I sum up the most important ones.

After the war, the Chamber of Culture became the ultimate symbol of the collaboration by artists during the German occupation of the Netherlands. Being a study of collective memory, this research therefore includes the concept of the Chamber of Culture in its title. Yet not everyone who registered with the Chamber of Culture – the great majority of the Dutch artists – was a collaborator. This research provides an overview of the many reasons why artists registered or did not. To mention a few: fear of loss of income was a common reason to sign up. Jewish artists sometimes also attempted, without success, to join the Chamber of Culture because it gave them hope at a time when their very existence was seriously threatened. After the war, a refusal to register was automatically seen as an act of resistance, although some artists who did not register merely opposed the organisational aspects of the Chamber of Culture but had no problems with its ideological nature.

After the war, various authors expressed surprise that little or no artwork made during the war reflects the vicious situation around it. Art historian Hans Mulder proposed to categorise as war time art the art from the post-war reconstruction period, such as the paintings of the Cobra group and the literature of Gerard Reve and W.F. Hermans, since it does deal with the war. It is more interesting, however, to study this post-war art and the art from the occupation period separately. The art of an era does not stand on its own, but reflects the spirit of the age by its form and content. Art historian Bram Hammacher is the only one who has pointed out that the Nazi dictatorship suffocated all artistic creativity. The art of 1940-1945 was a restrained and docile art because it was created by unfree artists, who in

addition – apart from an extraordinarily visionary person like graphic artist Hendrik Werkman – still had no insight into the size of the catastrophe caused by the Nazis. In sharp contrast to this art stands the vividly bright and idealistic work of post-war reconstruction groups like Cobra and Vrij Beelden. This was resistance art given retrospective effect. This was art that shows what the country *wished it had been*, while the subdued landscapes and still-lives of the occupation period show just what the nation in fact was.

Furthermore, it is striking that none of the artists discussed in chapter two found that his cooperation with the national socialist authorities – that, in addition to registering with the Chamber of Culture, included publishing in fascist magazines, exhibiting in national socialist galleries, creating propaganda art and accepting positions in the cultural-political field – had any political significance. Leaning on the principle of *l'art pour l'art*, they all stated that art and politics are strictly separate domains. They presented themselves as free-floating, nearly inviolable figures who always worked at their profession according to their own beliefs. For several reasons, however, it was impossible *especially* for artists to take a neutral stance towards the Nazi regime. In the first place, art was an official propaganda medium in the national socialist society. Secondly, artists had to deal with registering in a mandatory professional association that was structured to be discriminating against outsiders. Thirdly, the registration procedure required the submission of an Aryan Declaration, a certification of their ancestor's 'Aryan' nature. Nevertheless, the adoption of the apolitical position is also understandable. During the war, it was a way to deal with criticism, after the war it was used to influence the judgment of the 'Ereraad', the official purification council and to repair a reputation as someone who had been 'wrong'.

Two paintings are extensively discussed in chapter two because they had far-reaching consequences for how their makers were received: *Self-Portrait with Black Headband* by Pyke Koch (1937) and *The New Man* by Henri van de Velde (c. 1937). Both paintings have been the subject of debate for quite some time, both scholarly and in the media. The central issue of this debate is whether these works should be understood as fascist or not. Based on iconographic research and (re)interpretation of historical sources, I conclude that both paintings have a fascistic developmental origin and therefore the paintings also should be seen as fascist.

The memory of the war played a significant role in the reformulation of the canon of Dutch art post-1945. Such people as Willem Sandberg, Bram Hammacher, Hans Jaffé, and Edy de Wilde, who were largely determina-

tive for the image of Dutch art after 1945, used the power of collective memories to promote non-figurative styles. Art that they found to be stylistically 'good' – such as the work of Mondrian, Karel Appel and Hendrik Werkman – they depicted as morally 'good' art. The notions 'free' and 'pure' were frequently linked to this art, which had a positive influence on how it was received. Cultural historian Aby Warburg already pointed to this 'mnemonic' potential of art in the early twentieth century: as a reservoir of memories, art has a wholesome and unifying effect on society. Art found to be stylistically 'wrong' – the realism the Nazis had favoured – was given a political burden to bear. This art, no matter what the political stance of its maker, was put into association with war and fascism. This way, a few prominent persons in the post-war art world created a fitting art for the resurrected, democratic Netherlands; an artistic answer to the fascism that had dominated the country for five years. This makes just how closely the 'free', post-war art is related to the form of government.

An image that often shows up in media and literature is that of the collaborationist artist who went out of favour *because* he had collaborated during the war. This study shows that this is much too simply stated. For while it was indeed the case that Van de Velde and Polet fell into obscurity, Koch did manage, after a few years of silence, to regain his former popularity as an artist. There are several reasons for Koch's comeback against odds. In the first place, his political preference could be presented as 'innocent', Mussolini-style fascism. This in contrast to Van de Velde, who, as a former member of the National Socialist Movement, found himself in a more difficult place. Because of their clear identity, former members of the National Socialist Movement were hardly able to manoeuvre along the spectrum that ranged from 'wrong' to 'good' closer towards the 'good' – something that was easier for collaborators who did not have this recognizable status. Koch's position within the elite, and the social network that went hand in hand with it, also meant a lot for his post-war appreciation as an artist. In addition, more than did Van de Velde and Polet, this painter lived up to the ideal of the romantic artist that has been in fashion since the nineteenth century. The rules that apply to this eccentric bohemian differed from those for an average person, as was also evident in Koch's case. The most important reason for Koch's comeback, however, was his work, which fit wonderfully into the post-war idea of what good art had to be like: it was not pleasing, it disquieted instead of soothing. In the present-day art world, Koch's ambiguous, sometimes shocking scenes and his androgynous women are preferred by definition in the contemporary art world to the one-dimensional still-lives and landscapes popular in

the thirties and the war years. Koch's professional resurrection was not without a hitch, however. Especially since the 1960s, art critics covering Koch's exhibitions have tended to bring up the war. The tone of Koch's reviews has changed over the decades, and shows how different generations and social groups have thought about the war. It is striking that the judgment of Koch's attitude during the war has become more severe over time. There are a few reasons for this. With the passing of time and the coming of new generations, the taboo on speaking about painful topics like Dutch collaboration and the high percentage of Jews deported from the Netherlands has eroded. Besides, with the post-war increase of individual freedom and expression and the decline of bourgeois community spirit and law-abidingness, there has been a growing lack of understanding of the submissive attitude of the majority of Dutch society during the German occupation. On top of that, criticising Koch's political stance implies a confirmation of the political correctness of the own age. Put briefly, through the story of collaborationist artists and their art, this dissertation shows that art is a carrier of ever-changing memories and identities; and that its appreciation and interpretation are inextricably linked with this function.

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